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LAY WORK IN THE CHURCH,

AND

HOW TO DO IT.

ADDRESSED TO MEMBERS OF

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND,

BY

A CHURCHMAN.

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LAY WORK IN THE CHURCH,

AND

HOW TO DO IT.

“GO YE ALSO INTO MY VINEYARD.”

Every force in Nature is utilized by man. The gusty wind and the falling torrent are made to give out useful effect. Fire and water are his servants, the lightning his messenger, and the secret treasure house of the earth is ransacked in every nook for the precious or the useful metal. In daily life the utilization of every expedient which man's ingenuity has devised for the reduction of labour, or its equivalent, the saving of time, is eagerly adopted, and they who are slow to avail themselves of such help must fall back and be left behind in the impetuous race and the keen competition for which our times are remarkable.

The rule holds good in other matters not merely commercial. Unutilized force is waste, and it is because, I think, that the Church is being too much content with her old machinery and not adapting herself as she might and

ought to do, to the stirring times in which we live, that these lines are penned by me as a Churchman.

I do not suggest the alteration in any material sense of the bases or lines upon which the Church works, but without doubt there is much room for improvement in the mode of working, and this by the application of such new and more powerful machinery as may enable her to grapple more effectively with the ever-increasing work which she, as a National Church, has to do.

I am not insensible to the recent infusion of life into our Church—the shaking up and clearing away of some of the sedimentary deposits of the past half century. Nor do I underrate or overlook the earnest work of the many faithful who have done and are doing what they can to enlarge the borders and strengthen the walls of our Zion. But what is urged is the employment of the great power yet only very feebly called into effective use—I refer to Lay help.

I have been long impressed with the conviction that the Lay element in the Church of England is not utilized as it might be and ought to be, and that the future success, progress, and stability of our Church and her hold upon the hearts of the people may be greatly promoted by impressing into active work the Lay power which is at hand and which remains dormant.

The past progress and increasing influence of the various Denominational bodies have in my opinion been greatly if not principally secured by their organized system of Lay agency. In this particular I think we might advantageously imitate them.

Is there not in the Church of England too much the



idea that the Minister is the functionary appointed to do duty for the parishioners, and that, excepting the Wardens and Sidesmen, external and organized Lay help is not much if at all expected or needed. I am not unmindful of nor undervaluing the self-denying labours of the army of Sunday School Teachers who, as noble pioneers, toil on from week to week and from year to year without attracting much public notice or recognition and perhaps with too little encouragement and appreciation on the part of Churchmen generally, of the great and permanent good they are doing. Neither do I forget the band of Lady Visitors, whose quiet and unostentatious Christian and charitable ministrations amongst the poor in many parishes are so praiseworthy. Nor shall I omit mention of the Lay Readers and Voluntary Choirs—all these deserve recognition and more than that, they are entitled to our warmest thanks. But beyond and outside all this there is a great, wide, and useful field for Laymen to labour in, and the cultivation of which has too long been neglected. There is a work to be done of vital importance nationally, and which calls aloud for willing hearts and hands to enter upon it.

It is quite true, and is subject for sincere congratulation, that there are on every hand signs of renewed life and activity, and that earnest Churchmen are making most hopeful and encouraging efforts to interest and benefit the great masses of our population; but in too many instances the reverse is the case, and apathy permits the increasing growth of weeds and hindrances to real growth and life.

Let us take an example. A town parish of 6000 souls.

Public spirit and substantial help have raised a Church. The Minister enters upon his work full of zeal and determination ; he organizes this and that detail of parochial work, but in time he gradually sinks under the weight of individual responsibility and falls into routine. Close personal intercourse with his people becomes more and more rare ; the parishioners accept the perfunctory duty as routine—it is nothing or very little more, and so it goes on from week to week and “all the year round.” This example is not overdrawn. It is a true picture of many parishes in this county and elsewhere in the industrial centres of our country.

Such a state of things is not always due to the fact of inability to do the work, but in many cases is traceable directly to the easy going apathy of the resident beneficed Clergyman.

Churchmen in such a parish become less and less induced to do any parochial work, and the machine moves with heavy dull regularity. There is no expansion or elasticity, if we may say so under the simile of a machine, there is no life in it.

Then as to Churchmen themselves. Is there amongst us as Churchmen that desire for active participation in Church work and progress which there ought to be ? Do we exhibit that desire and have frequent and neighbourly conversation upon higher matters and how to extend the knowledge of those eternal interests of which the Church is the messenger and herald. If there be a review of the sermon, is it not too frequently more in criticism of the manner or style of the preacher than a consideration of the great truths his discourse was intended to impress.

This want of communion amongst Churchmen themselves, and of closer intimacy between them and their Minister, is such that there are parishes in which, as year by year passes, many of the parishioners never have the privilege of an hour of serious conversation with their Vicar or Pastor, nor are their dwellings visited by him, except perchance he is hurried to the bedside of the dying, or that the death of some member of the household bring them together at the grave side. With the masses the Clergyman is kept in reserve as it were, to be "sent for" in a great emergency, instead of being the frequent and welcome visitor, the counsellor, and friend. All this comes of the want of closer relationship between pastor and flock. They do not know each other, and consequently there is mutual reserve and mistrust. If they were found working together as labourers, dividing somewhat the work and the difficulties and trials of those who go into the vineyard; this coldness and estrangement would soon disappear, and we should have what we so much lack: more mutual sympathy, more Christian love, more discipleship in deed and not in name only.

With proper organization we could, as Churchmen, soon alter the existing state of things and give vitality to many a congregation; courage to many a weary and desponding pastor, and life to many a valley of bones.

Our main aim ought to be, and the great necessity of our times is, that we should by some means affect and bring in the great outside mass who, in our thickly populated towns are not reached by the efforts of ordinary ministrations nor are attached to any religious denomination. It is the especial duty of the National Church to see to these. They have a right to demand it,

and if they do not ask for it it is our duty to carry to them the Word of Life—to search them out, to seek them up and “compel them to come in.”

The National Church is for the people, and to the people she must look for strength in her hour of need, and for support in her time of trial. If the people be with her and love her then she need not fear the assaults of her enemies, and especially can she throw back and put to confusion the impious intrusions and the advancing boldness of the men who, in these days of sceptic philosophy and human dreaminess, practically and openly say “There is no God.”

The advocates of Atheism and of an ill-concealed Communism are ever active, especially amongst the very class whom we desire to influence, and whilst we sleep they are sowing tares amongst the wheat. We cannot feel that the Church is doing her duty in these stirring and eventful times until she organize some additional means for bringing the outside masses into her fold.

Thousands of honest poor amongst our town populations can say “No man has ever yet said to me ‘Come, let us go up to the House of the Lord.’” These people must look upon religion and Church going as a respectable and comfortable thing for gentlefolks chiefly. For the sake of our Church and country this notion must be eradicated, and the poorest man or woman must feel that there are others besides the “paid parson” as he is sometimes called, who care for them and theirs, and who love them for Jesus’ sake.

I imagine I hear some one saying “See what Church work has been accomplished; what Churches have been

built, and what congregations have been drawn together." I join heartily in congratulations at these unmistakeable signs of vitality. Another says, "The Church doors are open, the people are welcome." True, the Church doors are open, so also are the doors of the Public-house, the Hall of Science, the Sunday (sacred !) Music Saloon, the Discussion Meeting at the Tavern, the Atheistic and Democratic Lecture Rooms—these are open and inviting the working man to spend his Sunday. The promoters and proprietors of these places offer inducements to the working man. May not we, ought not we to work to counteract all this ? The people are not unwilling, and the responsibility will be at our door if we do not see that they get bread instead of a stone.

We live in practical times. Essays to be read must be short. Men want now a-days to have the gist of a matter without much verbiage, and already some who have perused these preliminary remarks may have expressed impatience and said mentally "We admit what you assert, there is room for improvement, for something practical. How would you set about the work so as to give it shape and effect ?" This brings me to the

SCHEME OF WORK.

I begin by stating that whatever is done should be in accordance with the views and with the entire approval of our Bishop, and with the hearty co-operation of the Vicar of the Parish or other Minister.

The Vicar of a Parish should select from his parishioners and secure the services of a few Laymen Communicants, who would be willing to assist, one way or other in Lay work. This brings us to the first obstacle which

has been raised—the difficulty of securing the help of Laymen. True, a mere formal invitation to take part in the work may not enlist their sympathies, but an earnest personal appeal could not, I think, be refused; at any rate the blame of want of interest in the work of the Church must not be laid at the Layman's door until the Minister has used every persuasive exhortation and exhausted every form of appeal.

If I were a Clergyman of the Church of England I should have occasion to deplore the condition of my parish if Lay help for any and every good work could not be had in it. The willingness to help ever so little in the Vineyard might be taken as a test of real spiritual life not to be mistaken, because where the will is there is work to be done to suit every circumstance of position and every variety of capacity.

Amongst other details of work to be undertaken by Lay-helpers, I mention the following as they occur to me :

1. Lay-readers. To read not in Church only, but during house visitation as opportunity afforded in the districts of their parish.
2. To assist in organizing and conducting Mission Services in schools, or in temporary or such other buildings as could be secured for this purpose in the populous districts of towns.
3. To assist and take part in Cottage Lectures, or rather fire-side gatherings of a family or a few neighbours, with short readings and exposition in affectionate and homely phrase.
4. House-visitation—not formal but casual, as opportunity afforded. An excellent introduction being a

suitable pamphlet print, or publication. If illustrated, so much the better.

5. Distribution of approved Books, Pamphlets, Leaflets, and Periodicals—Penny Gospels and Psalms, &c., &c., of these there are legion. Not doleful tracts with dreadful warnings, fearful examples, and awful threats, but those wherein Temperance, Honesty, Truth, Brotherly Kindness, Home Affections, and above all the Love of God in Christ are set forth in tender and winning words of comfort to the down-hearted, and of cheerful encouragement to the enquiring.

6. Workshop Addresses—ten or fifteen minutes during the meal hours and with consent of proprietor, now and again in the various districts.

By this means we really get directly at the class we most especially wish to influence and benefit.

7. Temperance (Church of England) Meetings, at least monthly, not for children only, but for men and women, to be addressed by men who know the world and its ways.

8. Week-night Services—one hour only—conducted in the Churches by Laymen, under guidance of Vicar.

9. Organization of short popular addresses in Schools or other places, rendered attractive by their style and interspersed with music or other recreation.

These addresses would be directed to subjects of good moral import and sound instruction.

10. Church attendance. Special and organized endeavours to get the people to come to Church, in

conjunction with arrangements with Churchwardens and Sidesmen for their convenient reception and attendance.

This would in many cases test the system of pew appropriation where free seats are very limited, for there are Churches in which every available pew is rented or appropriated, but where not one-third are occupied.

11. Periodical Meetings of the Lay helpers for conference, for reporting work done, for advice and counsel, and generally for furthering the work.

And further, Lay helpers, as an organized body of Churchmen, should be ready to act in any way in which the progress of Church work could be promoted. If they could not on account of variety of view as to ritual agree to work all together, they could in their respective parishes be working simultaneously and effectively on the masses.

Such is merely an outline of a scheme. It comprehends a good deal, but by no means all that needs be done. I am perfectly aware that the programme herein set out is not new—parts of it are in operation in many parishes, and at the same time there are parishes where such work as is herein suggested is almost totally neglected and unknown, and where mere routine duty is considered sufficient. Why should not every parish be enlivened by healthy activity? The wants of the people are growing in every direction with growing intelligence, and their cravings for more to interest and concern them are yearly increasing, and unless they be taken by the hand and led into what is good, there is too much fear that

they will drift along the silent and seductive tide of evil which is represented by the idea "let us eat and drink (to-day) for to-morrow we die." If the work of the Church of England is to be done as it ought to be, and if she is to keep to the front, which is her proper position, we must go into the highways and byways and compel the people to come in—a most gentle and most warrantable compulsion. We need not lower the Standard of Faith the least bit below the level of a manly, honest, and true exposition of what is right and good and true, but to gain recruits to our Standard we must carry it forth and hold it aloft gallantly and fearlessly everywhere.

It has been pointed out as a matter for congratulation that increased attendances of the working and other classes have been of late years secured in many Churches by an elaborate and ornate ritual. Advanced or high ceremonial of itself may attract for awhile, and may draw in some who have not hitherto attended Church or any place of worship, but these attractions will not supply the real want; they may captivate, and indeed elevate for a time, but the mere sensuous excitement will soon be dulled and will crave for more and more, so that at last the hungry and thirsty instead of being filled will be "sent empty away." Give but the poor the pure simple Gospel set forth in all its beautiful simplicity—its substantial comfortableness, its winsome loveliness, its enduring promises, its eternal steadfastness, and its irresistible power, and though rough may be the hands that handle it and unsentimental the hearts to which it is addressed it will win its way and prosper. Though dark the street, dingy the alley, and humble the dwelling into which its light be carried, its lustre will

remain untarnished, nay, will be increased by the workman's handling, and its brightness will shine with more than electric halo into every nook and corner wherever it is faithfully read, preached, or spoken.

I hold that the great and successful means for securing the attendance of those who keep outside our Churches must be mainly through Lay help. These people rather dread the visit of the Parson, it is too formal and oppressive. They look upon him as paid and kept to preach certain dogma without vertical or lateral deviation—that he is the repository of a creed or belief which is too hard for them, a knowledge beyond their capacity; whereas the well-timed visit and plain homely talk of the Layman would in many cases be welcomed, and thus the way would be opened up and smoothed for further advance. The Layman could appeal directly to the daily experience of his fellow man, as a man of toil. He could introduce many a telling and homely illustration. He could sympathise from experience with every struggle, and listen to every complaint, bluntly and perhaps sometimes coarsely put. The Layman could give practical advice in many an emergency, and so secure that solid friendship which ensues from disinterested service freely rendered.

In too many instances, I fear, the Clergyman appears to the working man as one who seems to have only book knowledge, and who views the real earnest struggle for bread and life as it were from an eminence, and not like one who himself is daily in the thick of the fight. The Layman's talk about such difficulties, trials, and troubles as he must daily encounter would be like the story of

some old veteran soldier talking to his comrades by the bivouac fire of perils past and battles won.

Acknowledging amply and thankfully what has been and is being done here and there, I plead for *more*, because, without doubt, comparatively little of the real available force is being used. The unappropriated Lay power of the Church of England is the Niagara with a hundred thousand horse-power of work falling idly and uselessly into the chasm below. A great effort of self-denial—a great invoking of help—a great and longing desire to benefit others must influence us, and no excuses such as are but too common must deter us, and especially no shyness nor shamefacedness. True men will not be ashamed to be engaged in such a work; they will be glad to be employed in any capacity where they can do good.

Commending this imperfect sketch to the consideration of Churchmen, I would appeal to their patriotism as well as to their churchmanship, because we are in danger of allowing to grow up amongst us multitudes who, or their children, may one day take retributive justice upon us for our neglect by raising the banner of Atheism or Communism, and setting up for themselves a creed recognizing neither the laws of God or of man.

Space does not permit, or I would have introduced the recent and earnest utterances of many of our Bishops and of the leading spirits of our times, who, alive to the importance of this subject, have used and are using their influence to bring about the evangelization of the multitudes who, as yet, wander as sheep without a shepherd, and who toil on from day to day without one refreshing

taste of that living water which alone can quench the thirst and refresh for the journey along the thronged and dusty road of life.

A CHURCHMAN.

“THE COMMON PEOPLE HEARD HIM GLADLY.”





